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Applying Iraq to Afghanistan

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Editor's Note: this article was submitted to us in early May, so the recent change in leadership at ISAF were not known to the author at the time. We feel the analysis remains relevant so we are publishing as is, and a re-write/ update is not what MAJ Burris needs to be doing in his last days before he's off to Afghanistan to do that "applying."

Now that the new US strategy for prosecuting the war in Afghanistan has been determined, military leaders and media pundits are turning their attention to discussions of the best manner in which to implement and execute the strategy. As the military develops plans supporting the strategy and journalists search for stories about the plans, both will ask three questions: first, what made US forces successful during the Iraq war; second, do those successes provide lessons learned for Afghanistan; and finally, how could US personnel translate those lessons to future military operations regardless of the culture and geography? This essay is certainly not the first to investigate these three questions; however, it is unique because it supports no political or military agenda regarding the war in Afghanistan.

Although this essay will not provide an analysis of strategic motives, take a position on operational decision-making, nor make political comparisons between Iraq and Afghanistan; it will explore the American policies that fomented transition of the Al Anbar province from what was once referred to as the “wild west” to what experts now call a model for stability operations. I will use process-tracing to identify relationships between US military activity and sustainable security in Anbar, present a theory explaining the correlation between US policy and provincial stability, present the general similarities at the provincial level between the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, and extrapolate the positive lessons learned from the Anbar experience to the current US involvement in Afghanistan.

To frame the discussion of current situation in Afghanistan, I will draw heavily from General Stanley McChrystal’s initial situational assessment provided to the US political leadership in August 2009. The result of my analytical research will be to provide US policy recommendations that are both specific enough to be effective at the provincial level in Afghanistan, as well as broad enough to be effective in U.S. military operations regardless of geographical location. In order to maintain academic rigor and to encourage professional military discourse, I will also address the counterarguments to the assertions laid out in this essay.

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Anbar Operations

The first phase in identifying the commonalities between Iraq and Afghanistan is to review US military operations in the Al Anbar province of Iraq. The region, which is comprised of major population centers such as Ramadi and Fallujah, was once the most violent region in the country. When the United States government announced the plan to return all sectors of Iraq to Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC), many observers believed that Al Anbar would be the last province to make the transition. In fact, Anbar was the eleventh of 18 provinces to achieve relatively effective self-governance when, on 1 September 2008, US forces returned the western Iraqi province of Al Anbar to Iraqi control. The identification and extrapolation of the variables that allowed for the transfer of governance from US and Coalition Forces to the Anbar provincial leadership is of paramount importance today as the US is searching for a cogent long-term strategy regarding the tribal regions of Afghanistan.

In order to identify the variables that coalesced to form the sustainable security and stability posture in Anbar, it is appropriate to narrow our analytical scope to the provincial capital of Ramadi.

In the summer of 2006, Ramadi by any measure was among the most dangerous cities in Iraq. The area of operations averaged over three times more attacks per capita than any other area in the country. With the exception of the embattled government center and nearby buildings held by a company of Marines, Al-Qaeda-related insurgents had almost complete freedom of movement throughout the city. They dominated nearly all of the city's key structures, including the city hospital, the largest in Anbar province.¹

In the months following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, Ramadi devolved into a cycle of violence controlled by Al Qaeda insurgents. The U.S. Army's 1st Brigade of the 1st Armored Division, charged with controlling the city beginning in mid-2006, described Ramadi this way: "Ramadi simmered for years as the paragon of all badness...All over Iraq, grunts told stories about Ramadi, the crazy-bad shit that was always happening there, how the city was seemingly composed of nothing but death and debris"². It is from this starting point that I will trace the emergence of a several key variables that lead a recent RAND study to conclude:

Iraq's Anbar province in 2008 was a very different place than it was in 2006. Then, the likely outcome of the struggle between al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) on the one hand and Coalition forces, the local population, and the governing institutions of the province on the other was anything but clear. Since that period, the level of violence has dropped dramatically. Life is becoming more normal, and politics has begun to replace violence as a way to settle disputes³.

¹ Colonel Sean MacFarland and Major Niel Smith, "Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point." *Military Review*, 2008: 41.

² David J. Morris, "Trophy Town: Ramadi Revisited, October 2007." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 2008: 34.

³ RAND National Defense Research Institute. *Living Conditions in Anbar Province in June 2008*, RAND Corporation, 2009: 1.

While there is not a checklist detailing a linear relationship between American military activities and the achievement of sustainable stability and security in foreign nations, there are certainly numerous causal relationships between the US military initiatives implemented in Ramadi, the reduction in violence, and the return to normalcy described in the RAND report above. Even though they did not arrive in a neatly packaged operational plan, the confluence and positive impact of the US initiatives was not random nor were they constrained by custom, culture, language, or geographical location. In the words of Major Niel Smith and Colonel Sean MacFarland, “the change that led to the defeat of Al-Qaeda in Ramadi—what some have called the ‘Gettysburg of Iraq’—was not a random event. It was the result of a concerted plan executed by U.S. forces in Ramadi”⁴.

Positive Provincial Policies

The evidence used to discuss the components of the US plan in Ramadi is recorded in three documents: a historical account of the Army’s 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division; a United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College thesis detailing the operations of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment; and a Naval Postgraduate School thesis analyzing counterinsurgency efforts in Ramadi. A review of this evidence is necessary to ensure a complete understanding of the link between U.S. policy and provincial security and stability.

For the duration of their nine-month stay in Ramadi, the “Ready First Combat Team” of the 1st Armored Division did many things well. They “reckoned the brigade had to . . . build Iraqi security forces, especially police forces, to succeed”⁵. The unit was able to begin recruiting local security forces through local tribal leaders willing to work with US forces. These local tribal leaders had decided to support US forces because “instead of telling them that we would leave soon and they must assume responsibility for their own security, we told them that we would stay as long as necessary to defeat the terrorists . . . When they began to think of us as reliable partners, their attitudes began to change”⁶. The “Ready First” highlights their ability to tailor operations in accordance with the input of tribal leaders as one of the most important factors in their ability to raise the level of sustainable security in Ramadi. In fact, they say that their ability to adapt their operational plans “based on the advice of the sheiks, our staunch and timely support for them in times of danger and need, and our ability to deliver on our promises convinced them that they could do business with us”⁷.

The incredible inroads made by the “Ready First” did not cease to exist when they redeployed from Ramadi. The 1st of the 6th Marines, who assumed partial responsibility for Ramadi from the “Ready First”, focused their efforts on conducting joint operations with the Iraqi security forces that had been vetted by the local sheiks and trained by their Army predecessors. The Marine task force conducted these combined efforts in order to accomplish three objectives:

⁴ MacFarland and Smith, 41

⁵ Ibid., 43

⁶ Ibid., 44

⁷ Ibid., 51

The neutralization of anti-Iraqi elements and critical threats to improving security and stability; the training, employment, and operations in coordination with partnered Iraqi Police and Iraqi Army; and the conduct and support to civil-military operations and information operations which develop the local population's trust and confidence in the abilities of their own elected leaders and security forces⁸.

United States Marine Corps Task Force 1/6 capitalized on the local security force gains they inherited from their Army counterparts through the development and implementation of what they call the augmentation team concept. The augmentation teams were comprised of roughly six enlisted Marines supervised by either a senior non-commissioned officer or a lieutenant. These teams served a dual purpose in that they "provided oversight of Iraqi Security Force operations and training, and provided much needed liaison between Iraqi Security Forces and Task Force 1/6 units"⁹.

The non-doctrinal, forward-thinking approach utilized by Task Force 1/6, enabled the commander to extend his influence indirectly past those in his command to "employ nearly 500 Iraqi Army soldiers and approximately 1,200 Iraqi Policemen—the effective partnership increased the battalion task force from 1,100 personnel to 2,700 personnel available to conduct counterinsurgency operations"¹⁰. By the time Task Force 1/6 departed Ramadi, a relatively effective indigenous security apparatus had been established and well-trained citizens of Ramadi were managing routine daily operations.

Although the ability of the US military to select, train, and conduct operations with indigenous security forces is extremely important in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, the best trained security forces in the world will be unable to defeat an insurgency with force alone. U.S. military doctrine subscribes to this belief and the U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* states:

COIN is not an approach to war that can be classified simply as foreign internal defense. It features full spectrum operations, including stability operations, like any other campaign. The course of an insurgency involves significant variations in the proportion of effort devoted to the different types of operations by region and time. In all cases, however, insurgencies will not be defeated by simply killing insurgents¹¹.

To bridge the gap between security and stability, U.S. military personnel along with their host nation counterparts must gain the support of the population beginning at the provincial

⁸ Major R.M. Hancock, "Task Force 1/6 in Ramadi: A Successful Tactical-Level Counterinsurgency Campaign. *Masters of Military Studies Thesis*, 2008: 7.

⁹ Ibid., 18

¹⁰ Ibid., 19

¹¹ Department of the Army, FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006). 1-1.

level. One needs to look no further than the writings of Mao, Galula, or Kilcullen¹² to understand the importance of the population in a COIN environment. Only from the population will the counterinsurgent force gain the operational intelligence required to defeat the insurgency and provide the population with the appropriate sustainable infrastructure and training required for lasting security and stability. As pointed out in a recent United States Naval Postgraduate School thesis, “most information in Ramadi was gained through mounted and dismounted patrols, route clearances, reconstruction projects, and meetings with local leaders. The local market often was a good place to gain information due to the numbers of people that congregated there¹³”. Had it not been for the efforts of the U.S. personnel stationed in Ramadi and their local Iraqi counterparts to develop enduring personal relationships with all the tribes living and working in the city, Ramadi would never have transformed itself into what former Marine and author David J. Morris calls a “trophy town¹⁴”.

Suggested Theoretical Framework

The following graphic depicts my theory of how best to achieve sustainable provincial security in Afghanistan based on the lessons learned from Ramadi.



The basis of the theory is that U.S. forces will sequentially accomplish three foundational tasks: achieve credibility with provincial leaders, establish a security force drawn from the provincial

¹² Mao Tse-tung, *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912-1949*, ed. Stuart R. Schram. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1992)

David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare Theory and Practice*. (Westport: Praeger Security International, 1964)

David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

¹³ Jarett D. Brommel et al. An Analysis of Counterinsurgency in Iraq: Mosul, Ramadi, and Samarra from 2003-2005. *Master's Thesis*, 2006. 30.

¹⁴ Morris, 14.

population, and gain the emotional and practical support of the provincial population. The variables affecting mission accomplishment all have to do with the skills and abilities of the members that comprise the U.S. military contingent.

The varying levels of sociological skill sets and their corresponding psychological characteristics will manifest themselves in the abilities of the U.S. military leaders charged with accomplishing the three foundational tasks leading to sustainable provincial security. Achieving parsimony with the use of this theory depends on the selection mechanisms senior U.S leaders use to ensure that the military officers with the skills and traits necessary for mission accomplishment are identified in order to maintain congruence between the required tasks and the available talent.

McChrystal's Afghanistan

Almost unanimously, political and military pundits agree that of the available military talent, General Stanley McChrystal is the right man to lead U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. "Given that the general was hand-picked by the administration, it seems reasonable to assume that he shared its assessment of the threat's character and the strategy for defeating it¹⁵. In a July 2009 directive, General McChrystal wrote:

Our strategic goal is to defeat the insurgency threatening the stability of Afghanistan. Like any insurgency, there is a struggle for the support and will of the population. Gaining and maintaining that support must be our overriding operational imperative—and the ultimate objective of every action we take¹⁶.

Based on General McChrystal's report to Secretary of Defense Gates and President Obama, it appears that the key to any successful strategy in Afghanistan is the fact that its focus is provincial in nature. The key geographical objectives of the major insurgent groups are Kandahar City and Khowst Province. The QST [Quetta Shura Taliban] has been working to control Kandahar and its approaches for several years and there are indications that their influence over the city and neighboring districts is significant and growing¹⁷.

In his report to the president, General McChrystal describes what he believes the priorities in Afghanistan must be. In a section titled *Build Relationships*, he states "In order to be successful as counterinsurgents, ISAF must alter its operational culture to focus on building personal relationships"¹⁸. Another of the General's priorities is that:

¹⁵ Andrew F. Krepinevich. "The War in Afghanistan in Strategic Context", *Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation*. 2.

¹⁶ General Stanley A. McChrystal. "International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Tactical Directive", 6 July 2009.

¹⁷ General Stanley A. McChrystal. *Commander International Security Assistance Force (COMISAF) Initial Assessment*. (Kabul, Afghanistan: ISAF Headquarters, 2009) 2-6

¹⁸ Ibid, 2-12

ISAF personnel must be seen as guests of the Afghan people and their government, not an occupying army. Key personnel in ISAF must receive training in local languages. Tour lengths should be long enough to build continuity and ownership of success. All ISAF personnel must show respect for local cultures and customs and demonstrate intellectual curiosity about the people of Afghanistan¹⁹.

Included in the portion of his report titled *A Strategy for Success*, General McChrystal states, “ISAF will integrate headquarters and enablers with ANA [Afghan National Army] units to execute a full partnership with the shared goal of working together to bring security to the Afghan people”²⁰. Speaking to the importance of regionally aligned local Afghan security apparatus, the general provided specific guidance including:

... doubling ANP [Afghan National Police] strength at the District and Provincial levels, significantly increasing the police-to-population ratio. The growth of ANCOP [Afghan National Civil Order Police] will be accelerated by generating 5 national battalions in FY '10 followed by the generation of 34 new provincial battalions and 6 new regional battalions.”²¹

Similarities beyond the Rhetoric

Although the international geo-political framework and the U.S. grand strategic stance toward the two countries are bifurcated, the internal operational level situation in Afghanistan is quite similar to that in Iraq. “In both of the current conflicts, conventional war A was followed by unconventional war B. In turn, war B was complicated by the need to conduct simultaneous stabilization and reconstruction activities”²². Because most Americans dismiss understanding the similarities between the two countries in favor of sweeping generalizations regarding their differences, the popular perception is that Iraq and Afghanistan are so dissimilar as to negate any potential transfer of lessons learned from one to the other. It is important to understand that differences between the countries exist, “but these differences do not take away from the fact that there are broad lessons that can be applied that go beyond the specifics of each nation and the precise circumstances of international involvement with them”²³.

Implementing the Theory

Successful implementation of the theory advocated in this essay is easy to apply to Afghanistan, requires no change to any existing U.S. foreign policy document, and does not necessitate a legislative overhaul modeled after the Goldwater-Nichols reform act of 1986. Successfully applying the theory to Afghanistan simply requires a slight policy change regarding

¹⁹ Ibid, 2-12

²⁰ Ibid, 2-15

²¹ Ibid, G-3

²² Joseph J. Collins, “Planning Lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq”, *Joint Forces Quarterly* 41, 2^d Quarter (2006): 11.

²³ Lydia Khalil, “Iraq the Model?”, *Small Wars Journal* (2009). Retrieved from <http://smallwarsjournal.com>

professional military education (PME). In their current configuration, the majority of PME courses produce a graduating class every twelve months; however, military leaders with the skills and traits required by my theory are needed in Afghanistan now. Therefore, during the initial phases of implementation, any revised PME policy must allow for short-duration, high-intensity emersion training packages tailored to specific military leaders already targeted for deployment. These training packages should provide leaders resourced to conduct “operations in Afghanistan to reduce the capability and will of the insurgency, support the growth in capacity and capability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and facilitate improvements in governance and socio-economic development, in order to provide a secure environment for sustainable stability that is observable to the population”²⁴. Such a change in the short-term policy would result in a professional U.S. military cadre able to: achieve credibility with Afghan provincial leaders, establish reliable security forces drawn from a cross-section of the provincial level population of Afghanistan, and gain the emotional and practical support of the Afghan population. Even though short-term real world application of my theory would initially take place in Afghanistan, the future long-term relevance would span the international community regardless of geographical location and mission.

Following the implementation of the PME policy across the military services, leaders well steeped in stability operations by their specific service schools will augment the nucleus of leaders trained for operations in Afghanistan. The crux of the change to the PME policy is that “stabilization, reconstruction, and other issues associated with nation building must be better integrated into the curriculum of staff and war colleges”²⁵

The Counterargument

Opponents of a revised PME policy will invariably use U.S. involvement in Iraq to point out that military leaders not trained on the principles of stability and reconstruction were continually able to adapt historically proven tactics, techniques, and procedures based on conditions on the ground until they developed plans and programs that worked in their specific areas of responsibility. Skeptics will also articulate that implementing a new PME policy will further tax an already strained military budget while restricting the initiative of military officers. Summarily, those who disagree with my assertion that PME policy requires an overhaul will argue that the military made it work in Iraq and they did it without requesting one additional dollar in educational training funds. Francis Fukayama succinctly captures the essence of the argument against implementing a new PME policy by saying:

I would go so far as to argue that social engineering on the level of institutions has hit a massive brick wall . . . the real difficulties affecting the quality of life in modern

²⁴ McChrystal, *Commander International Security Assistance Force (COMISAF) Initial Assessment*. 2-2

²⁵ Collins, 13.

democracies has to do with social and cultural pathologies that seem safely beyond the reach of institutional solutions, and hence public policy.²⁶

In response to the counterargument, it is true that the leaders on the ground in Iraq discovered and implemented a successful military strategy focused on stability and reconstruction; however, “in Iraq, Washington fooled itself into believing that it could secure the country and our objectives there with a small force and in a short time frame. Years of painful and expensive experience in Iraq have cured that delusion”²⁷. If a relatively inexpensive change to the military’s PME policy could preclude additional years of painful learning in Afghanistan, there is certainly no valid reason to resist the change. Not implementing the PME policy will result in a struggle to answer questions in Afghanistan already answered in Iraq and a repeat of the fight that stabilized Ramadi, a nine-month fight in which “85 of our Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines were killed, and over 500 wounded in some of the toughest fighting of the war”²⁸.

Conclusion

In the near term, one of the most important factors that will affect the success of the US mission in Afghanistan is the degree to which the leadership adheres to previous military lessons learned. The US must identify and apply lessons learned from Iraq because these lessons can facilitate America’s goals of “preventing the Taliban from retaking Afghan cities, avoiding the risk that al-Qaeda would try to reestablish sanctuaries there, pursue a more aggressive counterinsurgency strategy in the North, and reallocate its civilian aid resources to places where the insurgency is still weak”²⁹. Failure to pay attention to the lessons learned in Iraq and their application to Afghanistan could result in a situation where “we control Kabul and the provincial centres [sic], but on occupied territory we cannot establish authority. We have lost the battle for the Afghan people”³⁰.

A near term change to the PME policy will not only have a positive impact on the war in Afghanistan, it will also meet the Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff’s (CJCS) intent for long-term leader development. According to CJCS, “My PME vision entails ensuring that officers are properly prepared for their leadership roles at every level of activity and employment, and through this, ensure that the US Armed forces remain capable of defeating today’s threat and tomorrow’s”³¹. Due to the rapidly changing parameters of the 21st century battlefield in Afghanistan and elsewhere, military leaders must be able to solve current problems, resolve

²⁶ Liam Anderson and Gareth R.V. Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy, or Division* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005), 191.

²⁷ Khalil, 6.

²⁸ MacFarland and Smith, 52.

²⁹ Giles Dorronsoro, “Fixing a Failed Strategy in Afghanistan”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009. Summary*

³⁰ Andrew North. BBC News. November 18, 2009 quoted the assessment of the Soviet military situation presented to President Gorbachev during a November 1986 Politburo session by the Soviet Armed Forces Commander Marshal Sergei Akhromeev.

³¹ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1800.01C dated 22 December 2005.

past problems still influencing the current situation, and anticipate future problems. These skills and abilities are of paramount importance because the professional military education that will bring them to fruition in the leadership force will drive the PME leader development paradigm of the next quarter-century.

Major Bradford M. Burris entered the United States Army in 1996 and has since commanded three times. He commanded a Field Artillery training battery from March 2001 until June 2002. He commanded Headquarters Battery, 2nd Battalion, 5th Field Artillery Regiment from November 2002 until March 2004 during which time he deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He commanded Alpha Company, 8th PSYOP BN (Airborne) from July 2007 until November 2008 during which time he deployed to numerous U.S. Central Command Area of Responsibility locations. He is currently earning a Master of Science Degree in Defense Analysis at the United States Naval Post Graduate School.

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